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An Eyewitness of the Serbian Apotheosis

By MADAME SLAVKO GROUITCH

BEING an American married to a Serbian and having spent my early years in Europe as a traveller and student, it was as a cosmopolitan that I came to Serbia. Here for the first time in my European wanderings I had the impression of reaching home, so very similar were the conditions of life to those of my native state, West Virginia. The resemblance extended to the atmosphere of the home and to customs of farms and villages, but more particularly to that attitude of mind towards life which we consider peculiarly American, and which I may describe as liberty so great that it is not conscious of laws. The Serbian people have a conception of duty toward the state and a public spiritedness from choice which I have encountered elsewhere only in Switzerland and the United States. No change was necessary in order to meet the women and men of my adopted country. They knew more about America than America did of them.

I soon learned that the singleness of patriotic purpose which had impressed me in my husband was peculiar to everyone I met from King to peasant, from prime minister to goat's herdsman. All were dreaming, as their fore-fathers had dreamed for centuries, of a united Yugo-Slav kingdom which should include the whole 13,000,000 of their race. As I listened I wondered.

There were barely three and a half million souls in the little Serbia of that day. To the south there was a region spoken of as Old Serbia, because there had arisen the Serbian kingdom of the eleventh century; beyond that was the region we speak of as Macedonia (and which in my mind, until I became Serbian, had not been associated geographically with the Balkans) containing a million and a half inhabitants of pure Serbian race still under Turkish rule. I learned very quickly of loyal little Montenegro—proud of the fact that in the veins of every peasant was the blood of the heroes who had survived from the great battle of Kossovo in 1389, in which the Serbian people had lost their independence, all but that one towering citadel. I learned of Croatia, which I had, in common with most people, always thought of as a province

of Austria; of Dalmatia with its republican traditions; of the Adriatic, a kind of Floridian Indian River bordered with pleasure resorts for the opulent Viennese. Very few people had ever realized until lately that this inland sea was as essential to the life of the peoples who bordered upon it as are the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans to the United States.

As I listened to statesmen and people making prophecies of the day when all these would be united to Serbia from that farthest point on the map, called Carinthia, to that extreme point called Monastir,—I felt it could happen only a long time after I should have passed away. Nevertheless, within the period of fifteen years I have seen these dreams come true. I myself have witnessed the tragedies—and there have been many—which have brought about the conquest of Old Serbia and of Macedonia, the liberation of Croatia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Slovenia, and Dalmatia, and also the invasion of Serbia and Montenegro during the war. I have seen the miracle accomplished, and the wonder of it is that it was brought about by impulsions as irresistible as those which “rule the stars and tides.” Every little child felt them; every little child contributed; its mother tossed it playfully in the air naming the great Serbian battles in a nursery rhyme; its mother put it to bed in poverty and simplicity, teaching it how to live humbly but to think grandly, sublimely, patriotically.

As the years went by and my diplomatic home was in Russia and afterwards in England—the two countries to which Serbia looked for aid in the achievement of her dream—I came only from time to time to my adopted people. But always their first words were of this wonderful thing that was in the bud, waiting to happen—and yet, so far as I could see, with no preparation for it, any more than there is external action to hasten the coming of spring. In Serbia as well as in all the allied countries at that time there were hopes for arbitration on the questions of liberty of peoples and territorial boundaries. It was the period when the Czar and England made the most intense concessions in settlement of ancient disputes to unite in an Entente with France to prevent war. I watched this accord with a certain fear, because I felt that it surely would mean the buckling in of the aspirations of my adopted people. How were the Yugo-Slavs all to be freed and united if there were an Entente to preserve that present state of injustice?

The Great Entente was made in 1906. Shortly afterward I went home to Serbia. Naturally I talked with everyone I met of the new conditions. No one showed depression. The answer invariably was, "It will come about. It is bound to come." I was in England when in 1908 Austria-Hungary, as an act of defiance to the Entente, forcibly annexed the two provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The whole Yugo-Slav nation went into mourning for a deed that seemed to fasten the chains of despotism that much more firmly upon the greater portion of its race, but did not cease to repeat, "The hour of our deliverance will soon be at hand." Then came the war of 1912. I was sent on a mission here to my own country as the representative of the Serbian Red Cross, to ask aid for the sick and wounded soldiers who filled our hospitals. As a child I had heard from American missionaries of the horrors of the Turkish rule long before I had learned them from the stories of my adopted people who had suffered martyrdom at the hands of the Turks in Macedonia, and therefore I was astonished to find so little understanding of the causes of the Balkan war, so little sympathy for the suffering that was taking place in the Balkans. I believe the United States contributed ten times as much for relief to Turkey at that time as it contributed to any of the Balkan States. Again I asked myself, "Whence the help that is to liberate and unite Yugo-Slavia, if England, France, Russia, and America combine in the idea that no people shall ever again rise and call out for its own freedom?"

In 1913 there came the terrible tragedy of the Serbian-Bulgarian war, when I saw our Balkan block torn asunder by the agonizing torment of civil war—for war between sister nations is surely civil war. It seemed to me then that the dream of liberty and union for the Yugo-Slavs would fade into yielding, as had been once before the case in Serbian history when the late King Milan declared that Serbia was in the position of a young woman who had a strong affection and inclination for one young suitor—in that case the suitor was Russia—but who must make a *mariage de raison* with Austria. A secret treaty that would afford to Serbia greater economic prosperity, at the expense of Yugo-Slav freedom, was concluded between the King, his ministers, and the Austro-Hungarian government. The result of that deflection from the dream was that the King had to abdicate, for the Serbian people

repudiated a concession that should be for their material profit, but would enslave further their brethren in Austria-Hungary.

In 1913, looking conditions in the face, I could not see the way out to freedom and union for the Slavs of Austria. The great nations of the Entente had decreed a long era of peace, for which the weak peoples must pay the price in self-restraint, humiliation, and degradation.

Nowhere about me—in our own legation or in the allied countries—had I heard the suggestion that the liberty bells would ring in July, 1914, for Yugo-Slavia as they had rung in July, 1776, for this country. But the dream began to come true. The first cannon shot across the Danube proclaimed that the hour had come; that the beginning had been made, made by Austria-Hungary herself in an attack on the free peoples of Serbia. The beginning was not made by dreams of freedom, for the enslaved peoples of Austria-Hungary had never descended to plans for ruthless slaughter of women and children, as was done by the bombardment of the Serbian capital before its population could flee towards the interior of the country.

In the months that followed—when three times the Serbian people, though unaided by their allies and with insufficient ammunition for their cannon, resisted the invasion and overthrow of their country; with the dead so close together that I had to step over them in our hospitals to reach the living soldiers lying on straw; without any means of dressing wounds; with disease claiming thousands of victims—how could one hope for victory? And yet I saw hope on every face. No man in authority throughout those terrible months ever within my hearing spoke of a separate peace, of capitulation or surrender. And our splendid old prime minister when asked to capitulate on terms so advantageous to Serbia that it would have seemed at that time wisdom to accept them, replied: "Better to die in glory than to live in shame."

In the month of December, 1914, there happened a real miracle in Serbia, despite the fact that one-third of the country, and that the best of the farming and industrial region, had been invaded by the enemy. With one single railway line from Saloniki supplying its economic and military needs, the Serbian army manoeuvred its forces until the enemy was routed and driven from its country.

For eight months longer Serbia maintained her own frontiers,

Austria being powerless until Germany and Bulgaria joined with her in a fresh attempt at invasion. This time they succeeded in cutting the railway line, encircled our forces, and compelled a general retreat to the Adriatic coast.

For three months, October, November and December, 1915, we tramped over those terrible mountains of Albania without food, without shelter, leaving thousands of dead by the roadside. Day by day I watched the faces of the Serbian statesmen, officers, and soldiers who escorted the diplomatic caravans, in one of which I had been placed. With that curiosity of the American intelligence to probe the very essence of other people's souls I eavesdropped at their minds to know what they were thinking now that their country was invaded, their army forced to retreat, their women and children given over to martyrdom, and all that the army had accomplished in 1912 and 1913 lost by retreat. We were retracing the steps of the victorious army of 1912—retracing them as a defeated army. Where were their hopes of union now? The answer was, "We are bound for Saloniki to join our allies and fight for the freedom of Serbia and of Yugo-Slavia."

With their people scattered, their government living in a borrowed Greek island, it seemed futile to speak of Serbia as a nation. They were reduced to just a little group of men depending upon their allies for money to pay their army, to feed their prisoners of war, and the few thousands of their own people in exile all dependent upon the charity of the allied nations, including America, which, although not as yet an ally had shown its sympathy and charity. Inside the country the women and children wept under the martyrdom meted out to a conquered people. They were tortured by the Bulgarians, and oppressed in every conceivable way by the Austro-Hungarians, and yet the army and government dreamed and worked for the deliverance, not only of Serbia but of the whole Yugo-Slav nation. The prisoners in German camps, the martyrs under the Bulgarian lash dreamed of Yugo-Slav freedom.

While America played a glorious and noble part in that deliverance, the action on the Western front was, of course, the event that permitted the attack on the South. Was it not the will of Divine Justice, as well as by consent of the great allied com-

mander to whom we all owe so much, that the Serbian army, a few thousands of men, the remnant of the nation, should aim the first decisive blow of allied victory? The advance of the Serbian troops over mountains so high that only eagles or aeroplanes could be supposed to cross them struck the final blow for Yugo-Slav liberty, and the blow struck in the Macedonian mountains resounded to the extreme limits of Yugo-Slavia. "Where are you going?" asked a general of the French army of a Serbian wounded soldier whom he met on the road bleeding from a wound in the head. "That's not the way to the hospital." "I am not going to the hospital—I am going to Serbia and beyond that—I am going home to free Bosnia!" Within a month the face of every soldier of the Yugo-Slav forces was set towards home and the fight still to come for the liberation of the Slav provinces of Austria. There were men from Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina as well as from Serbia fighting in that army—citizens all of a united kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the national trinity of the Southern Slav race.

They found their country in a terrible condition. There were no roads; the population which came out to meet them was in rags; there was no fire; roofs had been taken off of the houses, floors had been torn up, even windowsills and doorsills had been burned by the enemy. The trees had been cut down in their cemeteries; and in certain sections in an effort to prove that the population was other than Serbian, the very names had been erased from the tombstones. But what did it matter? That for which the Slav peoples had toiled and died throughout a thousand years of conscious history had been accomplished—their complete freedom and union. I, an adopted daughter, have lived this Gethsemane of a people—this apotheosis of a nation—as a Serbian woman; my heart beating with the wonder and the glory of the sacrifice.

Now that this great inspiring gift of freedom and union has come to my adopted people, if we in Yugo-Slavia may look forward to a century of union and development of our material, ethical, and moral forces, and to the assimilation of whatever foreign elements there may be within our borders, the decisions of our peoples to rule themselves cannot but aid to promote the peace of the world. The rights of self-determination cannot apply to a single

town, or one side of a street; certain minorities must remain even after the wisest alignment of frontiers. Unhappily one cannot ask for the freedom of all the Yugo-Slavs: there are Serbs, Croats and Slovenes who must be content with other citizenship, although they have racial rights to be a part of this wonderful Yugo-Slavia.

The broad lines of the Slav nationality with its open-minded religious tolerance offers guarantees to religious liberty: the Orthodox faith under the Patriarch of Constantinople is very like that of our own Episcopal Church. Among the Catholics of Croatia and Slovenia there exists a feeling of brotherhood towards the other religions of their nationality, as shown by the fact that many dignitaries of the Catholic Church in those states helped loyally to lead the movement for freedom. In no country in the world does the Jew have greater opportunity and honor than he has in Serbia and than he will have in the whole of the new Yugo-Slav kingdom if he proves himself as good a citizen there as he is in Serbia. For the Turk I have seen proofs of tolerance in the efforts to preserve Mosques, and Moslem schools, ordered by our Crown Prince. After the war of 1912 every assistance was given to Turkish women from Macedonia who wanted to go to Turkey to look for their husbands if living or for their bodies if dead.

In my travels about Macedonia I have remarked the just treatment of the Serbian authorities towards the other nationalities, Greeks, Turks, Albanians, and Bulgars, and have discussed with them the fact that it is perfectly possible for people of different strains of blood to live together under the same flag and same government, if equal rights of citizenship are accorded to all their citizens. I believe firmly that we, the Slavs—if aided by America in this difficult hour of our transition when we suffer physically and mentally from the ravages of war—will be able to construct quickly a United States of the Balkans, and that before many years we may yet hold that Educational Peace Conference at Vienna which was interrupted by the Austrian ultimatum.